

FREEMASONRY AND THE PROGRESS OF SCIENCE

The fifth of a series of discussions of Ancient Freemasonry and Present Day Problems

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The present is commonly said to be an Age of Science. It is also an age of super-specialization, and specialization leads to one-sided development. It is often amazing to find out how little some people know outside their own immediate concerns.

Speculative Freemasonry was definitely designed to be an all-round educational influence. How has this come to be so completely forgotten? How can we recover the original balance of interests in our Institution?

ACCORDING to the views of many profound observers, there is but one fundamental problem in the world to which all other problems are auxiliary or incidental. This basic problem is the conflict between ignorance and education; the warfare of science against superstition, of truth against the twin falsehoods of prejudice and intolerance.

From this point of view, our present article may be considered as the keystone of our entire series of discussions of the relations of our ancient institution to the various modern problems which our world is facing today. It may readily be seen, after due reflection, how all the other social, political, commercial and religious problems of our times might be regarded as phases of this basic problem of the progress of scientific discovery and the more popular diffusion of scientific knowledge and understanding. Probably, there never has been a more excellent statement of the benefits to be derived from the solution of this basic problem than the maxim of the Master Teacher "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." Surely the founders of Freemasonry and the authors and revisers of our ritual must have given due regard to this basic problem of life when they designed the ceremonies whereby candidates are inducted into our Craft. Certainly the central theme of all our rituals is the leading of those blinded by the darkness of ignorance, and bound by the cords of superstition, out into the uplifting light of truth and knowledge. No one will deny the design of Freemasonry's educational aims and activities; but some may doubt whether, in our modern Masonic program, we are placing proper emphasis on the fundamental objectives of our Fraternity.

Have Our Lodges Shifted Their Objectives?

I do not hesitate to state that my personal observations of present day Masonic activities have developed the conviction that we modern members of the Craft have shifted the emphasis from the matters of highest importance and practical character-building value, which have been chiefly the cause of our world-wide influence and our worthy history. We still talk about the ancient activities, upon which the fame and credit of our institution has been established. We still profess due reverence and admiration for our ancient traditions. But, in our actual practice in most modern lodges, it seems to me

that we place our real emphasis upon trivial and incidental matters, and devote most of our attention to "feeds," functions and fraternity politics.

This criticism is not directed against the essential social activities of our Fraternity. My objection is that too few lodges devote any part of their program to anything but social and ritualistic matters. The great popular educational activities of our Order are thus side-tracked, or omitted altogether.

Freemasonry Had Educational Aims

Even the most superficial study of our ritual will disclose its essential educational character. In the early days, as any student of Masonic history will testify, the educational activities of Freemasonry were kept first and foremost. In fact, it would not be wide of the mark for Freemasonry to lay claims to the credit of being one of the earliest exemplars and advocates of the now popular adult educational movement.

While it must not be denied that many foremost leaders in our Fraternity today are putting forth most commendable efforts to preserve our worthy educational traditions and still keep our educational activities in the foreground; yet I doubt if any widely and well informed observer of Masonic activities will pretend that the average lodge devotes one-tenth as much attention to affairs that could in any sense be termed educational as every lodge ought to.

The Progress of Science: What Is It?

I trust that I am not causing confusion among the Craft, or at least in the minds of those who are following this series of discussions, by referring to the progress of science as meaning the same as educational progress. The terms actually are synonymous, even though so much of the activity of our times that is labeled educational is neither scientific, nor truly deserving of the title educational.

The scientist is a searcher for truth, an investigator, explorer and experimenter with the facts of our natural world. The teacher or educator explains and gives instruction regarding the facts discovered and the conclusions deduced by the scientist. This, of course, is not the entire task of the teacher, but it should comprise his principal endeavor.

Freemasonry and Science Are in Accord

Bearing these facts in mind, it will be noted that the aims of Freemasonry are in complete accord with the attitude of science. Every Mason should be a seeker after the enlightenment afforded by truth, on exactly the same basis as the student of science.

The deepest personal impression that I have gained from a study of the structure of our organization, and the history of the institution, is a profound admiration for what appears to me the sound scientific principles on which Freemasonry is based. It would, therefore, in my opinion, be a tragedy if we permit our lodge programs to continue their present tendency towards superficialities and frivolities, without serious protest and an earnest endeavor to turn the trend of thought back to the great educational aims and activities on which the solid fame of our Fraternity has been established.

Understand, please, that this must not be construed as a protest against any wholesome social or entertaining feature of Masonic activity. It simply registers my personal opinion that too many lodges at

the present day are concerned chiefly with the lesser things of Freemasonry, while they permit the greater and more worthy features to be crowded out of their programs.

While I must admit that my observations of Masonic activities have been limited principally to lodges in New York and a score or so suburban towns and rural villages, but, I should conclude from this circumscribed survey that not more than one lodge in a hundred now-a-days is placing proper emphasis upon educational matters in its regular program.

What Do Masons Know of Masonry?

This is not a plea for more dry-as-dust lectures in lodges. Neither is it a protest against a reasonable amount of fun and frivolity in our lodge activities. Wholesome fun is just as essential to character development as any other activity. But when your lodge devotes practically all its efforts to the operation of your degree mill and to purely entertaining affairs, you certainly are missing many of the real benefits and privileges of Freemasonry.

What I deplore most in modern Masonic activities, as I have observed the same in my visits to various lodges in my section to deliver my address on "The Masons of Tomorrow," is the appalling ignorance which so many of our younger brethren disclose regarding the real fundamentals of Freemasonry.

It was my observation of these matters which first drew my attention to the work of the National Masonic Research Society, and THE BUILDER. No auxiliary of Freemasonry, it seems to me, is undertaking a task that is closer to the fundamental ideals of Freemasonry, and no present day activity in the Fraternity is more deserving of the cooperation of all lodges and the support of all thoughtful members of our Craft.

The Crying Need of American Masonry Today

I have long contended that the crying need of modern Masonry is for a better understanding of the real principles and practices of the Craft. It is practically impossible, under modern conditions, to give our novitiates more than a smattering of Masonic information and understanding by depending entirely upon our ceremonials and our occasional informal lectures. Consequently a Masonic Study Club ought to be regarded at least as essential in every lodge as the Entertainment Committee.

In my travels, however, I have met with only one Study Club in the lodges that I have visited, but every lodge had an active and aggressive Entertainment Committee. I have been asked questions on Masonic matters which were such a confession of ignorance of the fundamentals of Freemasonry that it would seem to me that the questioners ought to be ashamed to ask them.

Some Little Things That Count

The blame for this condition, I believe, lies upon the Masters of our lodges, who are blinded by modern notions of "making a big show," so that they fail to estimate justly the value of certain things, which may be small in the general esteem and make little noise, but which loom large in making for the sound progress of a lodge.

I have run across any number of lodges which have had all sorts of difficulty in filling their chairs with men well grounded in the fundamental principles of Freemasonry. I have seen lodges disrupted because

untrained and injudicious officials have been elected to responsibilities which they were incapable of undertaking.

All these and many other difficulties would be overcome if it should become the universal practice in our lodges for the Master to appoint an Educational Committee to take charge of organizing and conducting a Masonic Study Club. It is not pretended that the work of such a Club would make as much show as the activities of the Entertainment Committee. It would be nonsense to claim that any sort of scheme would make Masonic study as popular as Masonic entertainment. But, in the long run, I believe, the half dozen members who might meet quietly once or twice a month to study the real fundamentals of Freemasonry would ultimately contribute more towards the permanent upbuilding of your lodge than the biggest entertainment you could possibly hold, or a whole series of them.

Perhaps you think I am straying from my subject. Quite the contrary, I assure you. In fact, we have now reached the heart of this series of discussions that I have been attempting to develop.

Let Freemasonry Keep Pace With the Advance of Science

My firm conviction is that Masonic Study Clubs should not confine their research to the dusty minutiae of Masonic history, but should include among their investigations some comparison between ancient Masonic principles and practices and the present day problems of our own lives and the real world in which we live.

Of course we must delve into the history of our ancient and honorable institution in order to discover its fundamental aims and objectives. Yet the vitalizing factor of our historic research will be the connections we make between the past, the present and the future of our grand old Fraternity.

It is my sincere belief that no single activity would do more to make Freemasonry keep Pace with the progress of science than to adopt some measure for establishing Study Clubs in all lodges. I hope to live to see the day when any lodge will be ashamed to admit that it does not maintain a Study Club.

As in our previous discussions, we have not attempted to treat this tremendous topic in any degree exhaustively. We have simply aimed to hit a few high spots, but, principally, have endeavored to raise questions in the minds of our readers. Our object, you understand, is to provoke or stimulate "come backs" and thus develop genuine discussions rather than the one-sided expounding of one man's personal opinions and observations.

The editors of THE BUILDER will welcome your comment on any phase of this series of discussions. If your views are at variance with those of the writer, so much the better. If you agree with the writer's general aims, but wish to suggest other and, possibly, more practical solutions of problems involved, by all means send in your suggestions.

In the next article of this series, we expect to discuss "Freemasonry and Modern Business Problems."

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